

Powder Point Bridge's importance spans generations

By Donna MacLearn
The Patriot Ledger

DUXBURY — When residents last year decided to rebuild the Powder Point Bridge for \$2.98 million, the obvious objective was to retain a physical connection with the barrier beach known as Duxbury Beach.

But some had another reason: a desire to preserve a link with the past.

The original bridge — at various times called Long Bridge, Gurnet Bridge, and Half-Mile Bridge — was built 95 years ago. Then as today, people wanted a shorter route to the north and south ends of the seven-mile barrier beach across the bay.

The bridge was built in 1892 and dedicated in 1895. Originally 2,200 feet long, it was shortened following the storm of 1898, which pushed the beach inland.

In 1977, the bridge was repaired to retain its six-ton capacity. The work cost about \$375,000. On June 11, 1985, fire damaged more than 50 feet of the structure. Fire officials said a smoldering cigarette might have been the cause.

The bridge was closed for 5½ weeks while repairs were made.

About 70 feet of decking and 12 pilings were replaced.

But three days after the July 20 reopening, town officials had to close the bridge again. Crews had found five snapped stringers underneath.

The following month, a private citizens group hired a consultant to do a preliminary study. In September, the state declared the bridge substandard so the town could apply for aid.

In March 1986, Universal Engineering and the bridge committee recommended replacing the bridge. Later that month, town meeting voted 352-33 to tear down the rotting bridge and build a new one made of tropical hardwood.

The town was authorized to borrow \$2.9 million to pay for the project, but when bids were opened three months later, the lowest was \$3.48 million.

Selectmen rejected the bids.

New bids were opened in August, and although they were higher than the budgeted amount, they were about \$500,000 lower than those submitted in the first round. That month, town meeting authorized the borrowing of up to \$3.2 million.

Bridge consultant Universal Engineering and one member of the

bridge committee recommended against hiring the low bidder, Harbor Marine of Warren, R.I. However, in September, selectmen unanimously voted to award the \$2.98 million contract to Harbor Marine. Demolition began in October.

A lumber supplier for the second lowest bidder filed a complaint with the state Department of Labor and

Industries alleging possible improprieties in the bid process. In response, the state this spring ordered the town to solicit new bids for the reconstruction phase.

The town went to court in hopes of preventing enforcement of the state's order, but in May, the attorney general's office decided not to pursue the case.

On May 21, the state detained a shipment of timbers because the wood was caked with soil and ants from South America. The timbers were steam-cleaned to prevent the possible spread of contamination.

The projected completion date for the bridge project is still June 20, although in May officials said there could be a delay of up to three weeks.